



PERMANENT DELEGATION OF FINLAND
TO THE OSCE

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ENGLISH only

Permanent Delegation of Finland to the OSCE
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Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association,
with emphasis on Freedom of Association
Session III

Ambassador Katja Pehrman, Permanent Representative of Finland to the OSCE

Finland aligns itself with the EU recommendations and key messages. The promotion and protection of human rights is a high priority for Finland. Freedom of association and freedom of assembly are key to a democratic society and functioning of active and free civil society.

We regard civil society as a central partner in promoting human rights in Finland and abroad. Civil society often works close to the people and therefore has an in-depth understanding of human rights problems both on the country as well as on the local level.

We warmly welcome the OSCE /ODIHR guidelines on human rights defenders, which were published last year.

I am glad to inform you that the **Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland has recently published guidelines for the promotion and protection of human rights defenders.** These guidelines present a strong message of encouragement to all staff members of our Foreign Service to actively engage with human rights actors. The guidelines are very practical and offer a number of concrete tools for the cooperation with human rights defenders. Our guidelines are available on the Internet, also in English:

<http://formin.finland.fi/public/download.aspx?ID=139784&GUID={E4B5A7D2-7766-4F22-B23C-27F6178F9CB6}>. We encourage other participating States to work on similar guidelines.

As also highlighted by Hina Jilani in her insightful keynote speech, in many countries human rights defenders act in very difficult circumstances and sometimes risk their own security and wellbeing, or those of their families.

As discussed during the previous Session II, human rights defenders often bring attention to those individuals or groups that are in the **most vulnerable situation and face discrimination in their society. Individuals belonging to these most vulnerable groups can be women, children, minorities, LGBTI persons and persons with disabilities, for example.** In our experience, working directly with civil society and listening to their views and ideas has resulted in the best practices. **The starting point is that their own assessment of the situation is heard and respected.**

During past decades the work of human rights defenders has become more visible and acknowledged globally. The Internet and social media are making it easier to bring human rights violations and problems out into the public and even make them known globally.

At the same time, unfortunately, resistance and hostility towards human rights defenders and their work are gaining more ground. Governments in numerous countries are reducing the space for civil society to act and engage meaningfully. This includes **restrictions on the freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.**

Reducing the space for civil society is more and more done also through new or amended restrictive legislation or regulation, by cutting available funding, or by promoting a hostile environment towards specific groups and human rights defenders.

We should intensify our efforts to stop and reverse this negative trend. The meetings such as today's SHDM on Freedoms of assembly and association offer us tools to work together towards this end.

Thank you.